



One of two of Leslie Kerry's candid photographs of women waiting for their children to emerge from school just moments before the Turkish & German bombardments, 9 January 1917.
(courtesy James Kerry)

'Epese katára!' The bombardment of Kastellorizo in the First World War, 1917

By Nicholas Pappas, Sydney

The dramatic events on Kastellorizo during the Second World War have undoubtedly masked much of what preceded it. Devastation and evacuation, together with the steady passage of time, have served to consign to obscurity earlier tragedies that occurred on the island, particularly during the years of French occupation (1915-1921). This article examines the calamitous events on Kastellorizo in the First World War that brought the island to the forefront of a brutal conflict in which the latest weapons of war inflicted severe hardship upon the island's population.

Kastellorizo's failed attempts to unite the

island with Greece in the aftermath of their March 1913 revolt against their Ottoman overlords had exposed the island to foreign occupation with the onset of the 'Great War'. Self-administration, albeit under the protection of autonomous Samos, had led to discord and internal strife – the perfect environment for intervention by a foreign power eager to extend its influence into the Eastern Mediterranean. And so, the French flag was planted on Kastellorizo on 27 December 1915. While, for some, this was a disappointment after almost three years of Hellenic 'liberty', most were relieved that France, a major naval power and a traditional friend of Greece stretching back

to the 1821 revolution, was now in charge in uncertain times.

But French occupation also carried with it serious consequences. Of course, the Kastellorizians had already alienated themselves from their former Turkish overlords by ejecting their representatives on the island. But it was altogether a far more serious situation once the island became a French naval outpost. The island was now officially Entente territory and, thus, an annoying thorn in Turkey's underbelly.

La pince du homard (the lobster's claw) is what the French administrators playfully

named Kastellorizo at the time, a reference both to its geographical shape and its potential to snap away at the Turks and their German allies across the water. And, within a short space of time, they brought havoc to the enemy, with raids on coastal defences launched from the island by French forces supported by enthusiastic locals who bristled at the opportunity to exact revenge for atrocities against Christian minorities in Anatolia with the outbreak of war.

All was going well in 1916 and there was a feeling that French naval superiority, combined with British air and naval power, may have proved a sufficient deterrent to any Turkish offensives against the island. But that was to change on the windy morning of Tuesday, 9 January 1917 when the British seaplane carrier, *HMS Ben-My-Chree*, steamed into Kastellorizo's harbour and moored close to the shore of *Péra Meriá*. The scene was a merry one, as the *Ben's* officers and crew were granted shore leave and mingled with their French allies while locals looked on with fascination. To add to the festive mood, the *Ben's* master, **Charles Samson**, ordered the ship's brass band to entertain locals by parading along the *kordóni* as they played traditional songs of their homeland.

One officer, **Leslie Kerry**, later described

what he observed as he ventured into Kastellorizo's narrow alleyways:

*There are no streets, just stone flagged alleyways separating houses very roughly constructed with timber and plaster. But the place has a very picturesque appearance as the houses are mostly tiled red, though the exterior walls vary in colour according to the whim of the respective occupants.*¹

Fortunately, Kerry and his fellow officers carried cameras and they took a number of photographs as they walked around the town. When they reached the *Horáfiá*, they observed some expectant mothers in their lavish costumes waiting to collect their children from school. Suddenly, at 2.15pm, just after Kerry had snapped some candid shots of the women in casual conversation, a massive blast followed by a shrill whistling noise was heard emanating from a considerable distance. Within seconds, an explosion shook the earth. Kerry again:

*At the first explosion all the children ran screaming out of school in a dreadful panic, then all the parents came rushing up the winding alley ways to meet them. There was absolute pandemonium.*²

Unbeknownst to Kerry, the *Ben* had been hit by the third of a cascade of shells that were being fired from the heights above Antifilo (Kas) on the opposite coast. And

the town had not been spared, with a number of shells scoring a direct hit on houses in Kavos and on a number of homes at the base of the harbour.

Relaxing in his requisitioned home on the extremity of the Kavos promontory, **Charles Héderer**, the French contingent's chief medical officer, was immediately called to action:

*I put on my shoes and, telling myself 'this is it', closed the door carefully. I made my way to the hospital which was in the direct line of fire. Here, a few clear orders and my excellent staff ensured with perfect calm the evacuation of the sick on stretchers or on the backs of men... above our heads noisy shrapnel and tiles came crashing down... The rain was terrible. We stayed put through the night, performing our tasks, operating, tending the wounded and the frightened women who were throwing themselves at our feet.*³

The damage to the town was extensive on this first day of the bombardments. Estimates vary, but all eyewitness accounts agree that no fewer than 300 shells rained down on Kastellorizo that day in an assault that lasted over three hours, most of it in teeming rain. 23 houses were completely destroyed, with another 30 partly damaged. Kerry reports that 'houses fell

One of two of Leslie Kerry's candid photographs of women waiting for their children to emerge from school just moments before the Turkish & German bombardments, 9 January 1917 (courtesy James Kerry)





Charles Héderer and naval chaplain Hermann Hüber amid the ruins of the hospital (now the museum) in the aftermath of the January bombardments. (courtesy Jacques Héderer)

like ninepins' and that he witnessed 'some horrible sights', while the island's French governor recorded in report that civilians were seen scrambling frantically up the mountain slopes behind the town to seek refuge in the island's heights.⁴

Reports of fatalities and injuries make for sorry reading; **Kalliope Patinióti**, aged 40, perished instantly in her collapsed home, while **Varvara Moldovánou**, aged 80, was struck and killed by shrapnel as she sought desperately to leave the town. More were to perish in coming days from their injuries or disease. Héderer estimated that, aside from the fatalities, at least 20 locals were seriously wounded in just this first assault.⁵

The largely-deserted town was eerily quiet the next day. The crew of the *Ben* had camped for the night in the monastery of *Ayia Triádha* above the town. Most of the terrified locals had also abandoned their homes, carrying just their bare essentials and hiding in monasteries and churches in the island's heights. Where a safe haven couldn't be found, families huddled in rock crevices and caves using their oriental carpets as makeshift canopies. In torrential rain and icy winds, it is unsurprising that

disease spread rapidly. '*Epese katára*' ('a curse has befallen us'), Héderer quotes the Kastellorizians frequently exclaiming as they clung together.⁶

But there was to be no respite for them. On 13 January, twenty shells fell on the castle, the *Mandráki* and the *Aheres* valley (the island's only reliable source of water), while four days later (17 January) and again on 19 January, sustained bombardment led to fears that this was probably a prequel to the seaborne invasion that had been confidentially predicted by a French informant, the exiled abbot of the monastery of St Nicholas in Myra, **Kýrillos Romános**.

And on 20 January, the anticipated invasion began. A flotilla of 12 small craft headed by a gunboat appeared from behind the islet of *Pano Makrí* (now part of Turkey) and, expecting little resistance, sailed towards Kastellorizo's harbour. But the French were ready, and the batteries at *Niftis* opened fire. Five of the attacking craft (including the gunboat) were quickly hit and sunk, while the rest scrambled eastwards to safer waters. The French and their civilian helpers on the island were momentarily jubilant.

But, as if in retribution, 2, 9, 12, 16, 26, 27 February 1917 saw further severe bombardment. With the successful defence of the island against the seaborne assault, many had just returned to their homes, only to abandon them again in renewed fear. And there were more casualties, as bombs fell indiscriminately on the town's outskirts while French and local medical teams struggled to care for the sick and injured. During this time, the monastery of *Ayios Yeorgios tou Vounioú* was transformed into a field hospital for those camped out of the town, with hasty burials performed outside the sanctuary's walls. At the same time, the exposed cemetery at *Mikró Nifti* was designated out of bounds, and burials for those who died in the town were conducted at the old cemetery in the *Horáfiá*, immediately adjacent to the newly erected church of *Ayios Yeórgios*.

It was clear to the French governor that the island's weaponry was proving insufficient to repel these sustained assaults, so he called for the urgent shipment to the island of new 120mm batteries. The concrete and steel placements were hastily installed in April, but it was to be another 12 months

before the guns would be deployed. In the meantime, Turkish and German priorities thankfully lay elsewhere, and aside from a further two days of bombardment (on 23 April and 6 May 1917), the island was relatively quiet and the mourning, clearing and rebuilding could begin as locals steadily descended back into the town. But these last bombardments were not without their own tragedy. Among the dead were **Antonios Kótis**, a local builder aged 62, who died when the roof of his home collapsed, while **Konstandinos Yiánnitsas**, a seaman aged 55, was killed instantly by shrapnel while camped with his family near the Barbouttis field in the southern part of the island. And in a sad postscript, **Sotirios Koufós**, aged 45, suffered fatal injuries while assisting the French on 16 April to haul up the new weaponry along the precarious road from *Návlakas* bay.

The bombardments were to be the catalyst for further emigration from Kastellorizo. When the French had arrived in December 1915, the population was in excess of 4,500. By war's end, in November 1918, this number had almost halved, as Kastellorizians rushed to apply for a *laissez-passer* to permit them travel to safer lands where earlier emigrants had settled from as early as the 1880s. This time the applicants were not just young males eager

to make their fortune abroad without fear of conscription in the Ottoman army, but entire families who felt that their island's days of prosperity were long gone. Successive French governors, each of whom envisaged (indeed clamoured for) the retention of Kastellorizo as a permanent outpost of France, did their best to stem the flow with promises of the benefits a permanent French presence would bring, but they were largely unsuccessful.



The votsalotó design commemorating the precise spot where a Turkish shell landed on 23 April 1917. (author's photo)

Hardly anything remains today of those frantic years. The *Návlakas* road is perhaps the most obvious reminder, and, until quite recently, French signposting on houses requisitioned from the local population could still be seen. The spot where a shell

landed in the forecourt of the *Santrapeia* school is commemorated by a decorative *votsalotó* design, while a decaying French grave honouring the service of a fallen Armenian soldier who served in the *Légion D'Orient* seems almost out of place today in the island's cemetery. Unsurprisingly, and despite these few reminders, those difficult years would be consigned swiftly to the dark recesses of popular memory, as new lives were forged overseas and another enthusiastic occupier arrived in March 1921 and quickly supplanted whatever remained of a colonial rival.

1 Letter, Leslie Kerry to parents, 14 January 1917, Leslie Kerry collection.

2 Letter, Kerry to parents, 14 January 1917, Leslie Kerry collection.

3 Letter, Charles Héderer to parents, 14 January 1917, author's collection (courtesy Jacques Héderer). The hospital Héderer refers to was located in the *konáki*, now the island's historical museum.

4 Le Camus, *Notice sur les évènements militaires à Castellorizo au cours de la guerre*, March 1919, SHM, Vincennes.

5 Letter, Héderer to parents, 14 January 1917, author's collection (courtesy Jacques Héderer).

6 Héderer, *L'île du Château-Rouge (Castellorizo)*, Paris, 1924, p.76.

The British seaplane carrier Ben-My-Chree on fire after the first bombardments, 9 January 1917. She was to sink later that day. (courtesy James Kerry)



The Natural History of Kastellorizo

THE AUTUMN BIRDS OF KASTELLORIZO

by Robert Moorhead

Kastellorizo does not support a large community of resident birds due to the lack of fresh water, particularly over the long summer drought. We do host a surprising variety of visitors and migratory birds due to our strategic location. The Mediterranean Sea forms a massive barrier for birds migrating between Europe and Africa. Some go west, via Gibraltar, where the coast of Europe is only 25 km from Africa. Others go east, reaching Africa through the Eastern Mediterranean. Migratory birds gather in great numbers in islands such as Kos and Cyprus where there are wetlands. Dry little Kastellorizo does however get its visitors, particularly in years like this, when we get early Autumn rains with fresh growth and an explosion of insects.

Little Owl – IUCN: Least Concern (stable)



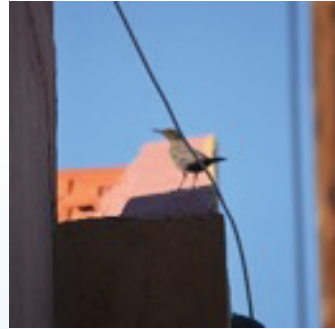
Little Owls (*Athena Noctua*) are resident on the island. They are found in temperate Europe, North Africa, and east to Korea. They are Athena's owl of mythology and can be seen around the village, particularly in winter. Mostly nocturnal, they are also active at twilight. This little fellow was spotted by the side of the concrete road in the valley below Vigla.

Red-Backed Shrike – IUCN: Least Concern (decreasing)



Red-Backed shrike (*Lanius collurio*) is a carnivorous passerine bird and member of the shrike family. It breeds from Western Europe to central Russia. It is migratory, and spends its winters in eastern tropical and southern Africa. This one was spotted in a characteristic hunting stance near the Paleo Kastro in late August. We see several shrike species through the year.

Blue Rock-Thrush – IUCN: Least Concern (stable)



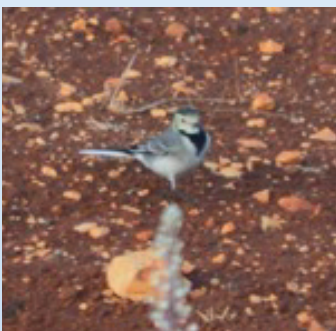
The Blue Rock Thrush (*Monticola solitarius*) is an omnivorous species of chat and an island resident. It breeds in southern Europe, northwest Africa, and from Central Asia to northern China and Malaysia. I once drove three hours to see a vagrant at Noosa National Park. It can be seen around town at this time of year and is responsible for a lovely raucous song. You will see it peering from behind rocks up on the mountain. The sharp beak, blue of the male, and darting movements are unmistakable.

Yellow-Legged Gull – IUCN: Least Concern (increasing)



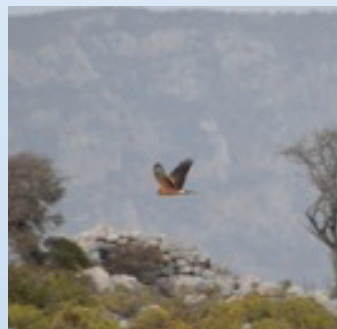
Yellow-Legged Gull (*Larus michahellis*) is a large gull found around the Mediterranean. You will always see a few hanging round the Limani, particularly bobbing in the water near the restaurants. Quite a shy gull, it is not as noisy as its cousins, and has distinct yellow legs.

White Wagtail – IUCN: Least Concern (stable)



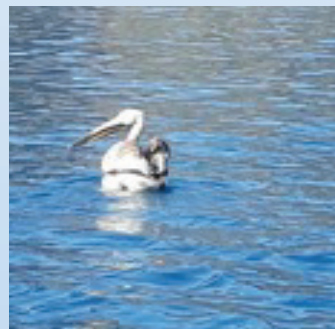
White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) is a late autumn visitor to the island where you can find flocks feeding on insects in open areas after rain. It is also seen in small numbers around the village. It breeds in much of Europe, the Asian Palearctic, and parts of North Africa. It has around 9-11 sub-species (mainly colour variations). Also look out for the Yellow Wagtails that visit a little later in the season in smaller numbers.

Pallid Harrier – IUCN Near Threatened (Decreasing)



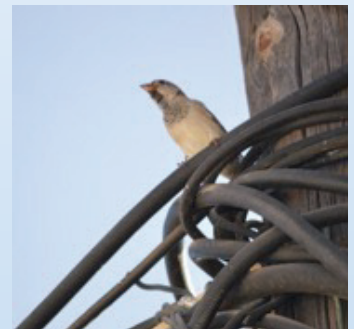
The Pallid Harrier (*Circus macrourus*) is a migratory bird of prey of the harrier subfamily. The scientific name is derived from the Ancient Greek *kirkos*, referring to its circling flight. It breeds in eastern Europe and central Asia, and migrates for winter in India and southeast Asia. I caught this passage migrant juvenile hunting on the plateau behind St George of the Mountain in September.

Great White Pelican – IUCN Least Concern (stable)



The Great White Pelican (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*) is a rare visitor to the island with this picture taken in September 2020. It is a huge bird that breeds from southeastern Europe through parts of Asia & Africa.

House Sparrow – IUCN: Least Concern (decreasing)



The House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) is a bird of the sparrow family *Passeridae*, found in most parts of the world. It is a small and active bird continually seen around the village in small groups. Females and young birds are pale brown and grey, whilst males have brighter black, white, and brown markings. It is native to most of Europe, the Mediterranean Basin, and a large part of Asia. Its intentional or accidental introductions to parts of Australasia, Africa, and the Americas, make it the most widely distributed wild bird, and the most common bird on the island.

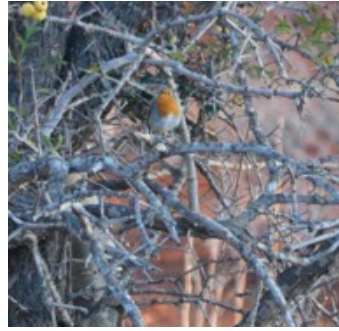
THE AUTUMN BIRDS OF KASTELLORIZO CONTINUED.

Common Raven – IUCN: Least Concern (increasing)



Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) is a large black corvid (crow) found across the Northern Hemisphere. It has many names and is prominent in folk law. Two pairs moved into Kastellorizo around 5 years ago and nest in the escarpment around Avlonia. Once persecuted widely, they have made a stunning recovery. A shy bird, they fly overhead making their distinctive pig like call – “Oink Oink” – you will hear them before you see them. This photo was taken from near Kavos, always in pairs, they mate for life.

European Robin – IUCN: Least Concern



European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) is a small insectivorous passerine bird. It is found across Europe, east to Siberia and south to North Africa. We think our Autumn visitors are resident in Anatolia, visiting Kastellorizo after rain. Both sexes have the distinctive orange breast with this fellow captured near Pitsonis Ambelli. You sometimes hear their joyful call around the village. One of my favourite birds.

Pied Wheatear – IUCN: Least Concern.



The Pied Wheatear (*Oenanthe pleschanka*) is a small insectivorous passerine bird. This migratory central Asiatic wheatear occurs from the extreme southeast of Europe to China, and with many migrating to winter in East Africa. We see them for a couple of weeks around the end of October, probably from the NE European population on their migration. This is just an example of at least 5 species of wheatear that visit the island. We caught this fellow taking advantage of the Pitsonis Ambelli restoration area.

And much more...



Birds are everywhere and are a constant joy, even if they're difficult to identify! Bird watching is a great hobby, and Autumn on Kastellorizo is the best time to go. Above is just a sample of what you might find. Record your observations on www.ebird.org and send in any pictures where you need help with identification.

We encourage everyone visiting the island at this lovely time of year to bring their binoculars and open their eyes and ears. These beautiful birds are all around us. Unfortunately, there is no field guide for the birds of Greece, so I tend to recommend the RSPB Birds of Britain & Europe which is good wherever you travel around Europe.

We dream of the day when 50% of Kastellorizo is protected and our little island continues to be a haven for biodiversity and migratory species. All it requires is a fence, time, and imagination. Perhaps we can even become an eco-tourism destination?

For more information on the natural history of Kastellorizo, please follow KNHG on Facebook: [Kastellorizo Natural History Group | Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/kastellorizo.natural.history.group), Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/kazinhg/> and iNaturalist: [Observations iNaturalist](https://www.inaturalist.org/observations?taxon=Erithacus_rubecula). Please share your photos and natural history observations and contribute to the documentation and preservation of Kastellorizo's unique environment.

To become a member, to advertise or for general information contact Marilyn Tsolakis, coordinator@kastellorizo.com www.kastellorizo.com PO Box 2118 Churchlands, Western Australia 6018.

Note 1: all photos have been taken on Kastellorizo between August & November

Note 2: IUCN – International Union for Conservation of Nature referencing the red list of threatened species.

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